

Don

Tapping at My Window

The old YMCA in South Melbourne was on the corner of Sturt Street and City Road. It was a five storey building situated on a site which is now a community garden between the Australian Ballet Centre and City Road, where it dips into the tunnel under the State Theatre and St Kilda Road, to become Alexandra Avenue.

I lived there during 1962, aged 17, while I attended RMIT undertaking a course in Farm Management and Maintenance. This was a short 15 minute walk due north to the other side of the City itself.

The accommodation arrangements would not be accepted today. I shared a room with another fellow, who, as far as I can remember, was allocated to my room by the YMCA. There were two small beds but only one large walk-in wardrobe. A small window looked out onto Sturt Street, where trams rattled past every twenty minutes or so. It's amazing how you get accustomed to these noises, especially as there were points in the tracks under our window, but even this additional rattle did not disturb my sleep.

Our room was on the fourth floor, and mostly I took the winding staircase up there, rather than take the slow old lift around which the staircase ran.

I suppose that there must have been upwards of a hundred residents there altogether, but they were hardly seen, being at work, or studies during the day, and out at night. I think that there was television room, but I can't remember visiting there. I also believe that there was a gym and a swimming pool, but I did not find them. Perhaps I was conscientiously studying. The dining room would have held about 50, where meals were included in the accommodation fee. A card about 6 inches by 4 with fourteen tear-off sections was provided when you paid your accommodation for the week – these vouchers covering breakfast and the evening meal. The dish which I retain in my memory is Nasi Goring, which I these days I think we'd would call fried rice. On checking, it's Malay for fried rice, so I wasn't far off, but why, in 1962, it would be called by that foreign name is a mystery. Meals were, in my memory, very palatable.

The showers and toilets were down the hall from our room. There were some 4 shower and toilet cubicles for about 10 rooms, that is about 20 men, but I don't remember having to wait for a either of them. Perhaps I showered late in the afternoon after college, when there was plenty of time to stay in the shower for as long as you wanted.

It was a strange way of life, looking back on it. While everyone was friendly, you only got to know your room-mate, unless you attended one of the social groups, such as the Y's Men's Club, which I didn't. My socialisation was at Scot's Church Melbourne, at the corner of Collins and Russell Streets. Apart from Sunday afternoon meetings with the Youth Group, Presbyterian Fellowship of Australia, there was also a Wednesday night social group meeting. At least that's the way I remember it. Good fellowship with mostly fellow students, male and female, all of us being away in the big city from our families in the country.

Across Sturt Street from the Y, construction works were in progress for the new Art Gallery, with their heavy pile driving machines thumping away all day, but they did stop for the night.

Traffic in St Kilda Road, the other side of this vacant block, which once housed a permanent circus, was unceasing. Even at three in the morning, its traffic noise was continuous: taxis, trucks, ambulances and police sirens continued with what became a continuous all pervading rumble, almost subterranean. That Road never slept. Quiet noises would wake you though.

We are told that our bodies are programmed to ignore familiar sounds while sleep, but an unfamiliar sound, however quiet, can wake you immediately. As our two bed-heads were each side of the slightly open window, despite the gritty air outside, I woke, at three in the morning, to hear a gentle tap, tap, tap on the glass. My room-mate, unusually, did not stir.

There was an owl, flapping wildly, just managing to click his beak on the window every few seconds. I was fascinated. What was this all about? (and Harry Potter's Hedwig hadn't been invented yet). I opened the window out further, to enable me to see the bird better, as it fluttered just in front of my face. It had a curiously familiar look, perhaps like Bob Menzies, large spiky eyebrows in a flat round face topped with white hair.

Amazingly, I just stepped out of the window above Sturt Street, and gently floated over the building site opposite, just keeping up with the owl, as it continued gliding gently over St Kilda Road, the Myer Music Bowl and then north over the City itself. Over Flinders Street, past St Paul's Cathedral, and all the way up over Melbourne University. 'I have no idea where I am going with this', I thought, 'this isn't happening, it's not real.' But I continued following, up and over Princes Park, along Sydney Road, climbing higher over Pentridge Prison so that by the time we reached Campbellfield, I could only just make out the features of the landscape. Almost immediately we were over Shepparton. Descending now, we came over Katamatie, and up Chapel Road to where it intersects with the Murray Valley Highway, four miles east of Cobram, with home on the right. Home, named 'Fenwick', after the Scottish lowland village from where my great grandfather migrated, by himself, aged 23, in 1862.

And, there's Mum at the kitchen sink looking north out over the front paddock, now moving around her prized garden, moving sprinklers over the small patches of lawn around the house, outside of which it was bare sandy soil with a range of fruit trees. Not to forget the precious jacaranda saplings which had to be covered with bags every winter's night to stop their bark from freezing at ground level. And the frost always won. Never did one of the half dozen jacaranda's get over two metres high before dying off.

I was then gently flying of my own accord over the dry sandy paddock around the house towards the dairy, where Uncle Frank would be bailing up the cows in the three pair dairy, talking gently to the cows which he share-farmed with us. No doubt he'd have his roll-your-own carefully inserted in his brown cigarette holder, and be chewing on a Kool-Mint. He would have had his cup of Bushell's Coffee and Chicory, and one of Auntie Jean's Anzac biscuits before sending the dogs out to bring in the cows. These two, Jean being my mother's elder sister, being my surrogate grandparents, and good mates.

Where was Dad? Bet he's on his Bulldog. His 1929 fully imported German HR5 15/30 single-cylinder Lanz bulldog which ran on heavy diesel. His boy's toy. Plenty of torque from that engine, just pop, pop, popping along all day with the 14 furrow Sundercut plough, getting the Pepper Tree Paddock ready for another wheat crop. Yes, that's his toy, it needs to be played with. Rather than a Primus blow lamp inserted at the front to get the hot bulb glowing red so it would start, he'd modernised to a small Porta-gas bottle with a blow lamp attached on a two metre long red hose. Having heated up the bulb at the front, the steering wheel would be removed, along with its one metre stalk, placed in the right hand side fly wheel and rocked back and forth until it fired. At which stage the injector pump hand lever would be pumped to ensure that it kept going, clock-wise. If it should happen to start running anti-clockwise, the injector pump would have to be held closed until the motor slowed enough to a rocking motion, when furious pumping of the injector handle would try to get it going clockwise. A marvellous achievement of German engineering this - no water pump, cooling was by hot water rising to gain flow through the radiators, and no electrics, as there were no spark plugs or instrument panel or lights. No doubt Dad would go home with ringing in his ears from the rhythmic soft explosions from the vertical exhaust pipe. And the noise would still be there as he settled down in bed with a book. I knew about the ringing in the ears, because I'd spent some time on that tractor during school holidays, so I envied him his monotonous pleasure going round and round and round that paddock, no doubt singing to himself as he went.

I was gently soaring around above him all this time, looking down on him enjoying the warm sunshine, enjoying the smell of diesel exhaust, and enjoying the earthy smell of the sandy loam as it was lifted and turned by the discs of the plough behind the tractor.

On waking, I held on to the dream as long as I could, and counted the weeks before I was there myself, either on the tractor ploughing like Dad, or cutting pasture for hay, or milking cows, or walking along the road behind a mob of sheep, or even working those sheep with drenching, footrotting their feet, or putting them through a sheep dip, or hooshing them up in the shearing shed. No we'll leave the sheep out, that's more of a night mare.

Home was calling, so the quicker I could finish this Certificate of Farm Management and Maintenance at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology the better. Time to get up.